

Preparing Turkey for a Crowd: Plan Ahead

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Turkey dinners are commonly served at church events, family reunions, or fund-raising banquets. Not everyone is comfortable with preparing large amounts of turkey for a crowd.

When preparing for a special event, remember there are invisible enemies ready to strike.

Follow these four simple steps to keep your food safe:

Clean – Wash hands and surfaces often.

Cook – Cook to proper temperatures (165°F).

Chill – Refrigerate promptly.

Separate – Don't cross contaminate.

Keep foods out of the TDZ (Temperature Danger Zone). This is where bacteria like to grow: 40–140°F.

Have a Plan

If you are responsible for preparing large amounts of turkey, consider the following Safe Food Handling Techniques.

The steps outlined below take into consideration cooking the turkey ahead of time and reheating the following day.

Turkey Preparation Steps	Keep it safe!
<p>Purchasing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purchase from USDA-approved source (e.g., locker or grocery store). • Transport immediately and place in freezer or refrigerator. • Plan ahead so space is available.
<p>Thawing (Optional thawing techniques are at end of this Extension Extra.) If turkey is purchased fresh or unfrozen, place directly in cooler.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thaw in refrigerator at 40° or below (preferred method). • Keep the turkey in its original wrapper. Place it on a tray or in a pan to catch any juices that may leak. • Allow 24 hours for each 5 pounds of turkey. • Avoid cross-contamination: Place meat on lowest shelf of refrigerator to prevent juices from dripping onto ready-to-eat foods. • Do not wash the turkey – washing will spread bacteria all over the kitchen.
<p>Cooking</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safe minimum internal temperature of the cooked turkey is 165°F. • When cooking whole turkey, insert the food thermometer into the thickest part of the thigh (avoiding the bone). For turkey roast or breast, insert into the thickest portion. • Never partially cook to finish later. <p>Oven-safe thermometers - insert in the inner thigh prior to placing the turkey in the oven, and leave in while roasting.</p> <p>Instant-read thermometer - do not leave in the turkey during roasting. Insert tip 2 ¼ inches deep into the inner thigh muscle, not touching the bone.</p>

Turkey Preparation Steps	Keep it safe!
<p>Cooling</p> <p>Have a plan in place: Cooling large amounts of food at one time is one of the biggest challenges for feeding a crowd.</p> <p>Improper cooling is also one of the leading causes of foodborne illness when feeding large groups of people.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For best results use the two-step method: cool to 70°F in 2 hours, then to 40°F in the next 4 hours for a total of 6 hours. <p>Use the following recommendations to hasten cooling:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remove the meat from the bone. • Divide turkey into small portions and place in shallow metal pans (Approximately 2 inches deep). • Place slices of turkey a single layer deep. After cooling is complete, slices can be transferred to a slightly deeper pan. • Use food grade containers that transfer heat quickly. (Aluminum – excellent; stainless steel – good; plastic and glass – poor). • Add ice directly to the juice, then pour over the sliced turkey. • Cover loosely until the turkey is cooled. • Do NOT stack pans of turkey that are cooling – air needs to circulate freely and remove the heat from the turkey and container. • Do NOT overfill your cooler or refrigerator. A common house-hold refrigerator does not have the capability to adequately cool a large quantity of food at one time. • Cover tightly after cooling.
<p>Reheating</p> <p>Reheating large amounts of food is a challenge – be certain you have the right equipment to reheat rapidly – get your turkey through the TDZ quickly!</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heat turkey rapidly to 165° F. within one hour (move through TDZ quickly). Measure temperature with a meat thermometer. • Add small amounts of hot broth or water to turkey to create steam. • Do NOT use chafing dishes, crockpots, or steam tables to reheat (foods are in the TDZ too long a time). • Reheat gravy to a boil – stir frequently.
<p>Serving</p> <p>Hot food hot, cold food cold.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain temperature of turkey at 140°F or higher in hot holding equipment such as electric roaster, stove top, or steam table. • If holding in crockpot to keep hot, do not hold for serving beyond 2 hours. Crock-pots are not effective in maintaining a specific temperature. • Do not add a fresh batch of turkey into existing batch.
<p>Consider these critical steps in your plan.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Thaw turkey in refrigerator. 2. Cook turkey to 165° F. 3. Use a meat thermometer to determine temperature. 4. Cool cooked turkey quickly. 5. Reheat to 165° within 1 hour. 6. Hold at 140° or higher for serving.
<p>Stuffing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cook separately from turkey. • Cook to 165° F. • Not recommended to prepare in advance and reheat – stuffing is too dense to cool and reheat quickly.
<p>Leftovers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If NOT cooled as recommended above, discard. • Gravy, mashed potatoes – use within 2–3 days. • Turkey, stuffing – serve within 3–4 days.

Thawing Tips: If turkey is partially frozen when ready to roast consider the following:

- Place the whole packaged bird in a large container and run water (70° F or colder) over the turkey.
- Or, go directly to cooking and allow for extra time.

For more information on safe handling of food when serving a crowd: visit the SDSU Food Safety Website for Quantity Food Preparation.
<http://sdstate.edu/hns/outreach/food-safety/quantity-cooking.cfm>



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